

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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FEBRUARY

February 1, 2019 THE POWER OF DISBELIEF

Readings for today: Exodus 13:17-15:18, Matthew 21:23-46, Psalms 26, Proverbs 6:16-19

February 2, 2019 NO FEAR

Readings for today: Exodus 15:19-17:7, Matthew 22:1-33, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 6:20-26

February 3, 2019 We Need Each Other

Readings for today: Exodus 17:8-19:15, Matthew 22:34-23:12, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 6:27-35

February 4, 2019 IDOLATRY

Readings for today: Exodus 19:16-21:21, Matthew 23:13-39, Psalms 28, Proverbs 7:1-5

February 5, 2019 DIVINE MANDATE

Readings for today: Exodus 21:23-23:13, Matthew 24:1-28, Psalms 29, Proverbs 7:6-23

February 6, 2019 CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Readings for today: Exodus 23:14-25:40, Matthew 24:29-51, Psalms 30, Proverbs 7:24-27

February 7, 2019 AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Readings for today: Exodus 26-27, Matthew 25:1-30, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 8:1-11

February 8, 2019 TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Readings for today: Exodus 28, Matthew 25:31-26:13, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 8:12-13

February 9, 2019 KNOWING GOD

Readings for today: Exodus 29:1-30:10, Matthew 26:14-46, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 8:14-26

February 10, 2019 CONFESSION

Readings for today: Exodus 30:11-31:18, Matthew 26:47-68, Psalms 32, Proverbs 8:27-32

February 11, 2019 WAITING

Readings for today: Exodus 32-33, Matthew 26:69-27:14, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 8:33-36

February 12, 2019 WHO IS GOD?

Readings for today: Exodus 34:1-35:9, Matthew 27:15-31, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 9:1-6

February 13, 2019 GOD IS ON THE LOOSE!

Readings for today: Exodus 35:10-36:38, Matthew 27:32-66, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 9:7-8

February 14, 2019 GREAT COMMISSION

Readings for today: Exodus 37-38, Matthew 28, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 9:9-10

February 15, 2019 IS GOD A DIVA?

Readings for today: Exodus 39-40, Mark 1:1-28, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 9:11-12

February 16, 2019 HOW TO READ LEVITICUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 1-3, Mark 1:29-45, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 9:13-18

February 17, 2019 LIVING INTENTIONALLY

Readings for today: Leviticus 4-5, Mark 2:13-3:6, Psalms 36, Proverbs 10:1-2

February 18, 2019 LORD, LIAR, LUNATIC

Readings for today: Leviticus 6:1-7:27, Mark 3:7-30, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 10:3-4

February 19, 2019 MYSTERY

Readings for today: Leviticus 7:28-9:6, Mark 3:31-4:25, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 10:5

February 20, 2019 DEMON POSSESSION

Readings for today: Leviticus 9:7-10:20, Mark 4:26-5:20, Psalm 37:30-40, Proverbs 10:6-7

February 21, 2019 THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Leviticus 11-12, Mark 5:21-43, Psalms 38, Proverbs 10:8-9

February 22, 2019 CHURCH "SUCCESS???"

Readings for today: Leviticus 13, Mark 6:1-29, Psalms 39, Proverbs 10:10

February 23, 2019 LEVITICUS AND JESUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 14, Mark 6:30-56, Psalms 40:1-10, Proverbs 10:11-12

February 24, 2019 INSIDE OUT

Readings for today: Leviticus 15:1-16:28, Mark 7:1-23, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 10:13-14

February 25, 2019 SEXUAL RESTRAINT

Readings for today: Leviticus 16:29-18:30, Mark 7:24-8:10, Psalms 41, Proverbs 10:15-16

February 26, 2019 THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for today: Leviticus 19:1-20:21, Mark 8:11-38, Psalms 42, Proverbs 10:17

February 27, 2019 THIN SPACES

Readings for today: Leviticus 20:22-22:16, Mark 9:1-29, Psalms 43, Proverbs 10:18

February 28, 2019 SABBATH

Readings for today: Leviticus 22:17-23:44, Mark 9:30-10:12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 10:19

February 1, 2019
THE POWER OF DISBELIEF

Readings for today: Exodus 13:17-15:18, Matthew 21:23-46, Psalms 26, Proverbs 6:16-19

Human beings seem naturally wired for disbelief. No matter what God does, it's never enough. Plagues in Egypt? Deliverance from slavery? Parting the Red Sea? Why is it so hard for us to believe? So hard for us to trust? Sure, we get that initial bounce when we experience a miracle. There's that initial rush of adrenaline as we realize we've come face to face with God. In Exodus 14:31, the Bible says, "Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." But as we shall see, their belief will soon fade in the days ahead. Eventually the spiritual high wears off and they will revert to form.

We are no different. How many of us can point to moments in our lives when God showed up in power? Experiences we had where God drew very near? Perhaps it was at the deathbed of a loved one or the birth of a child. Perhaps we sensed God's presence as we hiked through the mountains or fished our favorite stream. Perhaps God met us in worship or on a spiritual retreat. Maybe we've even experienced a true miracle in our lives. In those moments, we find the hair on the back of our necks standing straight up. Shivers go up and down our spine. And that's when it hits us...we've just been touched by God.

Why don't these moments last? Why do they seem to have so little staying power? Why are we so quick to forget? So quick to revert back to form? The Bible answer this question. We are sinners. We have a hard time walking by faith. Our hearts naturally inclined towards disbelief.

I have several friends who want to believe. They wish they could believe. They love the gospel but it just sounds too good to be true. They've had moments in their lives where God showed up. Moments where they experienced God's presence. Moments where God revealed Himself in a powerful way. But it's never enough. They always want more. More proof. More evidence. They demand God meet them on their terms. I get it. I feel that same pull myself.

What is faith? According to Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." According to Romans 4:21, faith is being "fully convinced that God is able to do what he's promised." Faith is not based on human logic. It is not dependent on human emotion. It is not grounded in human experience. It is not easy. It is not simple. It is not blind. It is a trust that God is who He says He is and will be faithful to do what He promises He will do.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 15:19-17:7, Matthew 22:1-33, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 6:20-26

February 2, 2019
NO FEAR

Readings for today: Exodus 15:19-17:7, Matthew 22:1-33, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 6:20-26

Many years ago, I had the pleasure of hearing a representative from International Justice Mission speak at a conference. If you are not familiar with this organization, they are the gold standard when it comes to combating human slave trafficking around the world. They work with local governments to pass legislation outlawing the practice of slavery. They conduct raids all over the world to expose corruption and set people free. They bring international pressure to bear to hold countries accountable for what happens within their borders. On this particular occasion, the woman representing IJM was sharing the story of a raid they conducted of a brothel where young women were being forced to engage in prostitution. Enticed by the promise of work, they had left the protection of home and family. Once they crossed the border into a new country, they became vulnerable and exposed. Traffickers picked them up and locked them in rooms. They were drugged. They were beaten. They were given barely enough food to survive. When IJM raided the building, they found the following words scratched by hand on the wall of one particular young woman...

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalms 27:1)

What a powerful testimony! This young woman came from a Christian home. Though she had endured unspeakable suffering, her faith never failed. She clung to Christ as a drowning person clings to a life raft. One can only imagine the number of prayers she prayed. The amount of tears she shed. The trauma she experienced. How many dark nights did she endure? How many times did she despair and lose all hope of being saved? How hard was it for her to scratch out those words with her fingernails? Harder still for her to believe as days turned to weeks turned to months with no salvation seemingly in sight? And yet, God heard her prayers. He sent IJM in to deliver her from her torment.

What are you most afraid of in life? What keeps you up at night? What fears haunt you as you sleep? Do you believe God is your light? Your salvation? The stronghold of your life? When your enemies attack you. When you feel like everything is crashing down around you. Though you live in constant conflict. Do you lean on the strength of Christ? Do you keep your eyes fixed on the Lord and persist in prayer? Have you felt the Lord's protection? Sensed Him hiding you in His shelter? Concealing you in His tent? Lifting you high upon a rock? From where has God's help come? From family? Friends? Your brothers and sisters in Christ? In what form did God's help come? Was it an encouraging word? An unexpected financial blessing? A helping hand?

God promises to walk with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. He promises He will be with us no matter what trials or temptations we may face. He promises to sit with us in our suffering. Wipe the tears from our eyes. Strengthen us so that we may endure the tests this life so often brings. No matter where you find yourself today, trust the promise of God. He will never leave you or forsake you! He will never abandon you or let you go! He is faithful! He is your light and your salvation! Do not be afraid!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 17:8-19:15, Matthew 22:34-23:12, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 6:27-35

February 3, 2019
We Need Each Other

Readings for today: Exodus 17:8-19:15, Matthew 22:34-23:12, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 6:27-35

No man or woman is an island. No one ever goes it alone. We all need community. We all need relationships. We all need help from time to time. I remember talking to a very wealthy man in New York City. He had made his fortune in commercial real estate. He was generous to a fault, endowing chairs at Ohio State and Princeton Seminary. He was gifted. He worked hard. He built his business piece by piece over a number of years. Many believed he was a genius. Many believed his legendary work ethic was the secret to his success. But when I spoke with him and asked him how he got to where he was in life, his answer was simple. "I had help along the way."

Moses is one of the greatest leaders in all the Bible. He had confronted Pharaoh. He had leveled plagues on an entire nation. Parted the Red Sea. Made water come from a rock. But even he grew tired in the midst of a battle and needed help to lead his people to victory. Thankfully, Aaron and Hur were there to steady his hands. Moses was the great Law-giver. The author of Torah. He was known for his wisdom and understanding. After all, he spoke directly to God. But even he couldn't handle all the requests for arbitration and judgment. His plate was too full. He needed help. Thankfully, Jethro was there to guide him.

We live in a culture that idolizes the individual. The man or woman who overcomes. The man or woman who does it all. The man or woman who not climbs the corporate ladder but also is a great spouse, raises great kids, and still finds time to hit the gym. The pace we're setting is impossible to keep. We all need help.

In the beginning, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone...I will make a helper fit for him." We all need helpers along the way. People whom God sends into our lives to get us to that next step. It may be a mentor. A spiritual director. A counselor. A life coach. A pastor. A friend. It may be a business associate. A social connection. A classmate from school. These people have a way of lifting our arms when we're tired. Encouraging us when we're down. Taking some of the burden off our shoulders. They are trustworthy. Faithful. True. To ignore them is to reject the very help God sends us in our hour of need.

Where do you need help today? What are you working on that could benefit from the assistance of those around you? What keeps you from asking? We were not meant to do this life alone. We were not wired to do our work alone. We were not meant to live as if we were an island. God has made helpers suitable for us. Chances are, they are already present in our lives. Ask God to show you who they are and invite them in. You'll be glad you did!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 19:16-21:21, Matthew 23:13-39, Psalms 28, Proverbs 7:1-5

February 4, 2019
IDOLATRY

Readings for today: Exodus 19:16-21:21, Matthew 23:13-39, Psalms 28, Proverbs 7:1-5

Reformation theologian and pastor, John Calvin, once wrote, “The human mind is a perpetual forge of idols...The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a god suited to its own capacity; as it labours under dullness, nay, is sunk in the grossest ignorance, it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God. To these evils another is added. The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly. The mind, in this way, conceives the idol, and the hand gives it birth.” (Institutes of the Christian Religion 1.11.8) Humanity has always had an “idol problem.” Everyone across the spiritual spectrum - pagan to atheist - falls prey to the temptation to reduce God down to size. Remake Him after our image so we can understand Him and ultimately, control Him. Pagans craft totems and little statues. They try to control God through magical incantations and sacrifices. Atheists demand God meet their standard of proof. They try to control God by subjecting Him to modern notions of scientific method and reproducing His miracles in a lab. New Agers keep God at arm’s length by blurring the lines between Creator and creature. They try to control God by sending happy thoughts out into the universe and keeping karma. Christians are no different. We do all we can to avoid the real Jesus. We much prefer a Jesus who looks like us and acts like us. A Jesus who only affirms and never confronts. And we try to control Him by offering Him only a part of our lives. Throwing Him a bone with our occasional worship. And cherry-picking our favorite Scriptures.

That’s why I love the words from Exodus today. God pulls no punches. He reminds us of the unbridgeable gulf that exists between us. We are not God. We are not even little gods. We are broken, sinful, finite human beings. We have no idea who we’re dealing with when it comes to God and that’s why God prohibits us from making idols or touching His altar with any of our tools. Because we invariably will get it wrong. Even our best attempts will fall short. We simply have not grasped the fullness of God’s glory and splendor and majesty. The heavens themselves can only “reflect” the glory of God. Creation itself cannot contain God much less anything we build with our own hands.

And that’s why God’s words here are so important. They should make us tremble. Drive us to our knees. Humble us before Him. “I am the Lord your God.” Do not worship any other gods. Do not try to remake Me in your image. Do not take My name in vain. “I am the Lord your God.” Live according to My commands. Value what I value. Love what I love. Do not murder. Do not engage in sexual immorality. Do not lie. Do not covet. “I am the Lord your God.” I have hardwired you for both work and rest. Keep the Sabbath day holy. I am the Lord your God. I have made you for relationship. Honor your father and mother. Treasure your family. These commands are not given to restrict us but to teach us how to truly live in right relationship with God and each other. Rather than resist God’s commands, embrace them. Rather than reduce God, let Him lift you up. Rather than settle for false gods and idols of your own making, humble yourself before the True and Living God. For as Calvin points out, “The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly.” All one has to do is look around at the evil and suffering and pain in our world to see the devastating impact of the idols we worship. The gods of violence and death run rampant and we continue to worship at their altars. The gods of sexual immorality, unfettered greed, and deceit dominate and we continue to bow down before them. We are slaves to our basest desires which is why so many are turning to drugs, alcohol, and other things to numb their despair. To quote atheist Yuval Harari, “Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don’t know what they want?” (Sapiens)

God created us for more. He created us in His image. For His purposes. To reflect His glory in the world. Don’t settle for anything less than God Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 21:23-23:13, Matthew 24:1-28, Psalms 29, Proverbs 7:6-23

February 5, 2019
DIVINE MANDATE

Readings for today: Exodus 21:23-23:13, Matthew 24:1-28, Psalms 29, Proverbs 7:6-23

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14)

From the beginning, God’s plan has been to fill the earth with His glory. It was the mandate He first gave Adam and Eve in the Garden. It is why He saved Noah from the flood. It is the reason He chose Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And it was His heart for His people Israel. However, we human beings have this innate tendency to resist God’s will. We want to live our own lives. We want to control our own destinies. We prefer safety and comfort and this keeps us from being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the earth with the gospel.

Jesus came to renew God’s mandate. The Great Commission is not new, friends. Jesus’ goal is the same as His Father’s! He came to fill the earth with the glory of God! He came to do what we could not! He was the faithful Israelite! The Second Adam! The One who perfectly fulfilled His Father’s will. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus accomplished all His Father desired. And Christians have been following in His footsteps ever since. Taking the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to every corner of the earth. Proclaiming to the whole world the testimony of Jesus Christ. Making disciples of all nations through baptism and the teaching of God’s righteous commands. This is why we were created! This is why we were redeemed! This is the whole purpose and plan of God for our dead and dying world.

God’s heart is for lost people. He longs to see everyone saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. His love for the world is what drove Him to send His only begotten Son. Sacrifice Him on our behalf on the cross. And raise Him from the dead. These are the lengths God was willing to go to save us. What lengths are we willing to go to save others? Christians have the heart of God. Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we long for lost people to be saved. We do not condemn those who do not know Jesus, we love them and serve them and witness to them of the glories of the gospel. We pray for the lost people in our lives. We look for opportunities to invite them into fellowship with God’s church. We sacrifice to spend time with them so that they may come to know what we’ve come to know...the love of God.

Friends, loving those whom God loves means loving lost people no matter where they may be found. At home. Across the street. In class. At work. Across the country. Across the globe. Reaching them is a mandate. A divine calling. It’s a responsibility given to all of us. None of us is exempt. It doesn’t matter if you are an extrovert or introvert or what your number may be on the enneagram. God’s plan is for you to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 23:14-25:40, Matthew 24:29-51, Psalms 30, Proverbs 7:24-27

February 6, 2019
CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Readings for today: Exodus 23:14-25:40, Matthew 24:29-51, Psalms 30, Proverbs 7:24-27

Practice makes perfect. How many times did I have a coach who used that line? I hated practice. Saw it as a necessary evil. Something to be endured until game day. Over time, I matured. I grew up. I began to realize the importance of practice. Daily rhythms that make us who we are as people. So I go to the gym most days. I engage in the same routines to build muscle and endurance and keep my body in shape. I read regularly. I engage my mind in daily routines to build memory and stay sharp. I practice spiritual disciplines of prayer and reflection on Scripture every single day so I can build my relationship with God. I worship every week so I can grow deep with a community of other believers. I go to Africa twice a year so I can humbly learn at the feet of some of the best Christians I know. Practice makes perfect and I am being perfected by the Spirit as I engage in these things.

Throughout the Old Testament, God sets up certain practices for His people. He requires them to keep certain feasts. Three times a year they are to appear before the Lord. The Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorates their deliverance from Egypt. The Feast of Harvest celebrates God's provision as Israel brings their firstfruits to the Lord. The Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles) marks the end of the agricultural year for Israel and they would mark the occasion by coming before the Lord and live in tents for a week to remember their wilderness journey. On the face of it, these practices can seem arbitrary or even unnecessary. Do we really have to go up to the Temple? Can't we worship God in our own community? In our own homes? Why do we need to go live in a tent for a week? Why do we need to give God all our firstfruits? Won't He understand if we fudge a little or keep some back for ourselves? After all, God wants us to take care of ourselves, right?

Wrong. God ordains certain practices because of the way He created us. We become what we practice. We are creatures of habit. We follow rituals and routines in order to be successful and make our way in the world. God knows this about us. He shaped and formed us in this way. And that's why, from the beginning of Scripture, God sets up certain routines to help us connect with Him. Six days shall you work and on the seventh you shall rest. Six years shall you work the ground but on the seventh you shall leave your fields fallow. Three times a year you shall leave your work and your home and present yourself before the Lord. Every week you will gather with the people of your community in worship. Every day you shall spend time in prayer and meditating on My Word. These rhythms are divinely appointed for our good. They are designed to make us in the likeness of Christ.

Building a deep relationship with God is never accidental. It doesn't happen randomly or haphazardly or only when we can spare the time. It requires intentionality. It requires daily spiritual practices that direct our attention away from "self" and towards God. This is not easy work because our natural orientation is inward. Our natural way of thinking is self-centered. Our natural desires are self-serving. If we're honest, most of our daily practices only reinforce this sinful way of thinking. Everything we do from the way we eat to the way we drink to the way we exercise to the way we spend our time and money is designed primarily for our personal pleasure and happiness. Such has always been the case which is why God lays down these commandments about Sabbath and sacred festivals and feast days. He is attempting to draw our attention heavenward. To get us to focus on Him.

What routines have you built into your life to help you connect with God? What rhythms do you keep that connect you to God's people? Jesus Himself says the first and second great commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. We need both the vertical as well as horizontal relationships in our lives. Left on our own, we will disconnect from God and disconnect from one another. So again, what spiritual practices are you engaging in to keep you from falling away from the Lord?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 26-27, Matthew 25:1-30, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 8:1-11

February 7, 2019
AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Readings for today: Exodus 26-27, Matthew 25:1-30, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 8:1-11

“Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.” (Exodus 24:9-11)

It's a powerful scene. Moses and the leadership of Israel going up the mountain to meet with God. The plain sense of the text suggests they actually enter heaven. They see God face to face. I try to imagine what that journey must have been like. One moment they are climbing over rocks and boulders and the next they're walking on sapphire pavement. One moment they are surrounded by smoke and fire and a great cloud and the next they can see for what feels like miles. One moment they're weary and tired and struggling for breath and the next they're sitting down at God's table to eat and drink.

Then they come down and construction on the Tabernacle begins. This will become the place where God will meet with His people. Tabernacle. Altar. Courts. Lamps and lampstands. Curtains. Even the vestments of Aaron and his sons who will minister before the Lord. All have their antecedents in heaven. All are copied from the heavenly Tabernacle where Moses and the elders had just met with God. All are attempts to approximate what they had just seen and experienced.

Furthermore, they build at God's direction and command. Stop and think for a minute...the Living God who rules and reigns over the universe desires to create a space to meet with His people face to face. Amazing! God claiming physical space on the earth which will be His space. Sacred space. Heavenly space. To enter this space is to enter heaven itself. To enter this space is to enter the presence of God in a very tangible, concrete way. How gracious is our God to condescend to us in this way!

In churches all over the world, believers pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray on a weekly basis. We pray many things in that prayer but one of the lines says this, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When we pray this prayer, we are asking God to make His dwelling among us. We are asking His Kingdom to invade our space. To invade our world. To claim the earth as His own. In a very real way, the church itself is to be a little taste of the Kingdom in this world. A colony of heaven in a culture of death. Believers who pray for God's will to be done on earth, pray with the awareness that this begins in each individual's life. As we surrender and submit our will to God, we become living tabernacles of the Holy Spirit. God making Himself known through us to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 28, Matthew 25:31-26:13, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 8:12-13

February 8, 2019
TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Readings for today: Exodus 28, Matthew 25:31-26:13, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 8:12-13

I love today's reading from Matthew 25. I love how the righteous and unrighteous appear before the judgment seat of Christ. I love the vision of Jesus coming with his angels to reign and rule over the earth. My heart longs for the day when all evil and suffering and pain and death will perish and eternal life will begin in earnest.

On that day, I want to be counted among the righteous. I want to be set at God's right hand. I want to inherit the Kingdom prepared for me from before the foundations of the world. So what will that take? At first glance, it seems like a whole lot of work! :-) Feeding the hungry. Making sure thirsty are refreshed. Clothing the naked. Visiting the sick. Spending time with those who are incarcerated. Welcoming the immigrant or stranger. If I'm not careful, this will become a "to-do" list as I seek to work my way towards salvation. A standard I have to meet in order to be declared righteous in God's sight. But a careful reading reveals something much different.

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' (Matthew 25:37-39) This is the mark of true righteousness. It is never self-conscious. Never self-promoting. Never self-centered. The righteous who cry out to Jesus seem utterly unaware of how much they've been serving the Lord. They are not trying to follow some road map to heaven. They are not trying to earn their salvation. They are simply living from a deep relationship with Christ. Their love for the least and lost in the world is the natural outgrowth of their faith.

The gospel transforms us from the inside out. It starts in our hearts and extends to our hands and feet. It is subconscious more than conscious. It is instinctive. Intuitive. Innate. When your heart has been changed by Jesus, you cannot help yourself but love what He loves and serve those He serves. As you ponder and pray over these verses today, ask yourself the following questions, "Do I find myself naturally doing the things listed in this passage? Is my heart broken for the same things that break God's heart? Do I live generously? Open-handedly? Always looking for opportunities to serve the least and lost in our world?" If so, if these things come more and more naturally to you with each passing year, then be assured you are in Christ. You have an inheritance waiting for you from the Lord Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 29:1-30:10, Matthew 26:14-46, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 8:14-26

February 9, 2019
KNOWING GOD

Readings for today: Exodus 29:1-30:10, Matthew 26:14-46, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 8:14-26

God wants to be known. Think about that for a moment. God wants to be known. The Creator of the universe wants His creation to know Him and love Him and serve Him. The One who stands outside time and space. Infinite and glorious beyond measure. Omnipotent. Omniscient. Omnipresent. Majestic. Splendid. Dwelling in unapproachable light. This same God wants a relationship with you. With me. With every single human being on the face of the earth. The billions who've been born and will be born.

When we read the latter part of the Exodus story and it starts talking about curtains and tableware and altars and tents, it's easy to lose sight of the main point. When we get into Leviticus and we start reading about all these archaic laws governing what we eat and what we wear, it's easy to get lost in the minutiae. When we find ourselves in Numbers with its talk of so many silver plates and so many sacrificial oxen and its census of each tribe, it's easy to get lost in the weeds. The main point of all this work is to prepare a place where God can actually, physically, tangibly, concretely meet with His people. Where they can approach Him. Speak with Him. Interact with Him. Receive from Him all the blessings He has stored up for His chosen people. Listen again to these words from Exodus 29:45-46, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God."

God wants to be known. He wants us to understand His heart. His character. His nature. His great desire is for us to spend eternity probing the mystery of who He is. Getting to know Him better and better with each passing age. Plumbing the depths of His being so that we can understand more fully what it means to be made in His image. To bear His likeness. This is God's great design. This is how He set up creation. This world – this universe even – is to be His Temple. The place where His glory dwells. We will serve as His priests, exercising and extending His dominion over all He has made. This is why God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt and it is why Jesus will deliver His people from slavery to sin.

God wants to be known. It's why He sent His Son into the world. So we could touch Him. Hear His voice. See Him with our own eyes. God now has a face. God now has a body. God has a name and it is Jesus. Jesus came to make God known. Jesus came to reveal God in all His fullness. There is no part of God that is not revealed in Christ. No hidden God behind the Christ. God is Jesus. Jesus is God. And every time we take part in the meal Jesus Himself instituted, we are reminded who this God is and what He's all about. He is the God who dwells with us. He is the God who delivers us from evil. He is the God who saves us from our sin. He is not just a god, He is our God.

Do you know this God? I mean, really know Him? Is He your God? Is He the Lord and Savior of your life? Have you experienced His saving grace in your life? Friend, you don't have to wait. God wants you to know Him and all He requires is for you to confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. Do this and you will be saved. You will become part of God's chosen people. He will be your God and you will be His child.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 30:11-31:18, Matthew 26:47-68, Psalms 32, Proverbs 8:27-32

February 10, 2019
CONFESSION

Readings for today: Exodus 30:11-31:18, Matthew 26:47-68, Psalms 32, Proverbs 8:27-32

We live in a world of affirmation. A world where every feeling. Every emotion. Every desire is something to be celebrated and embraced as long as it doesn't hurt ourselves or others. We are deeply passionate creatures. Driven by primal forces too deep for us to understand. We do not question. We do not think. We do not evaluate whether these desires are good or bad. We simply engage them. We satisfy them. We believe this is the only path to true happiness.

The Bible cuts against the grain of our current cultural experience. It calls us to submit every desire and take every thought captive to Christ. It teaches us how to live for God and not for Self. It speaks directly against the prevailing wisdom of our world. It forces us to come to grips with the depravity and corruption of our hearts.

It calls us to confession. To acknowledgment before God of our sin. To agreement with God regarding our unrighteousness. But we resist His will and His way. We choose our own path which leads to self-destruction. "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." (Psalms 32:3-4) Whether we keep silent before the Lord or we spit in His face, the outcome is the same. Pain. Suffering. Heartache. Heartbreak. Our bones waste away. Our strength dries up. Our lives do not reflect the glory God intended.

Confession is hard because it requires submission. Surrender to a will that is greater than our own. It requires us to bow the knee before God and accept His Lordship over our lives. This is why the Psalmist uses the image of a stubborn mule to make his point. "Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you." (Psalms 32:9) Yes, we are all stubborn asses before the Lord. We all struggle to accept His leading and guiding. We all want to go our own way.

But what happens when we finally surrender to Him? What happens when we do finally humble ourselves and confess our sin? God forgives. God showers us with grace. We no longer have to hide or pretend or put on a good face. We no longer are slaves to fear. We no longer are slaves to our own desires. We can live beyond ourselves. We become a blessing to others. God's steadfast love surrounds us. He becomes our hiding place. A refuge in times of trouble.

Does regular confession mean we will never go through hard times? No. It simply means we will experience the abiding presence of Christ all along. Because we've agreed with Him and acknowledged Him and humbly submitted to Him, He will become our strength and our shield. The world is wrong, friends. Desperately wrong. And we all know it. We can all feel it in our bones. We know deep down that everyone living for themselves. Everyone chasing that which makes them happy. Everyone seeking to fulfill their own desires leads only to pain and suffering. So repent. Confess your sin. Exchange the affirmation you crave for the acceptance God offers in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 32-33, Matthew 26:69-27:14, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 8:33-36

February 11, 2019
WAITING

Readings for today: Exodus 32-33, Matthew 26:69-27:14, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 8:33-36

“Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.” (Proverbs 8:34)

Listening. Watching. Waiting. Three essential ingredients to a deep and vibrant relationship with God. But they do not come naturally. I am much more apt to speak rather than listen. Much more apt to take action rather than sit back and watch. Much more apt to jump in and get involved rather than wait for the right time. I am an impatient man. I do not like waiting in lines. Waiting in traffic. Waiting for much of anything.

Listening, watching, and waiting on God has always been a challenge for me. My prayers tend to be monologues. My time with Him can turn into a spiritual “to-do” list. Read your Bible. Journal. Pray. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Historically, I’ve spent so little time in silence before the Lord. So little time waiting for Him to speak. I am always in a rush. Always in a hurry. Always on to the next thing.

I think this is why Israel made the golden calf. A careful reading of the text reveals their impatience. Moses had been gone a long time. For all they knew, he could have perished on the mountain. They grew impatient. They grew restless. They wanted to get on with it. Lay hold of all God had promised. They wanted to worship. To celebrate their deliverance. Their motives were not all bad. They simply wanted it to happen on their timeline rather than God’s. So they turned to Aaron and asked him to get a move on. Aaron was anxious as well. So rather than lead, he followed. He gave into the people’s demands, making an idol for them to worship. A tangible God they could see and feel. This is always the lure of idolatry. We create a god we can control. A god we can understand. A god who operates according to our schedule.

It is easy to read this story and criticize the Israelites. How foolish of them to worship a golden calf! As if we are any better. Sure, our idols are not made of gold or silver but they are no less real. We worship all sorts of things. A cursory glance at our checkbook or schedule reveals all we need to know about our true priorities. Our struggle to simply sit in God’s presence each day to listen, watch, and wait shows us the depths of our impatience. We want God to fit into our lives. We’ll give Him the gaps in our schedules. We’ll give Him the leftovers of our resources. We’ll throw Him a bone every now and then just to cover our bases.

But God will not be mocked. As quick as we are to turn away, God is equally quick to judge. To discipline. Moses eventually does come down the mountain. He smashes the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. He grinds the golden calf to dust, mixes it with water, and makes everyone drink. He confronts Aaron. He puts down a rebellion. And then he prays for the people, asking God for forgiveness.

There are consequences when we fail to listen and watch and wait for God. How many times has our impatience cost us? How many times have we gone off half-cocked? Or rushed into a situation we did not understand? How many times have we made a decision we later regretted because we didn’t take the time to get all the information we needed? Blessed indeed is the one who patiently listens to God’s voice. Watches at God’s gate. Waits beside His doors. How different would the Exodus story have been if the people of God had simply waited for Moses to come down before taking action? How different would your life or my life be if we simply waited for God to speak before taking action?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 34:1-35:9, Matthew 27:15-31, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 9:1-6

February 12, 2019
WHO IS GOD?

Readings for today: Exodus 34:1-35:9, Matthew 27:15-31, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 9:1-6

Today's reading is one of the most significant in all of Scripture. Moses appearing before God yet again on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses receiving the Ten Commandments yet again as God turns aside his wrath and renews His covenant. Moses getting a chance to see the Lord as He descends in a cloud and hear His voice declare, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) You see, God isn't interested in simply giving us a set of laws to follow. He wants to be known. He reveals the depths of His nature and character here. He is not just any god. He's not like the gods of the Canaanites, so capricious and arbitrary. No, our God is merciful and gracious. He is slow to anger. He abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps faithfulness to the thousandth generation, forgiving all iniquity and sin, while at the same time exercising His righteous judgment on the guilty. He is a God of justice as well as grace. A God of holiness as well as love. And He shares all this with us so we can have a relationship with Him.

What is Moses' response to the divine revelation? "And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped." (Exodus 34:8) He falls on his face before the Lord. He averts his eyes. He trembles in astonishment and awe at what he's just seen and heard. The God of the universe leaves His throne room in heaven to be with us. The Creator desires a relationship with His creation. The Maker of all things descends to meet with us, speak with us, and show us His glory. There simply are no words so Moses worships.

Fast forward hundreds of years. This same God who revealed Himself to Moses on Sinai. The same God who would meet with Israel in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. The same God who led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This same God is born in a peasant home in a backwater town in an obscure province of the Roman Empire. Laid in a manger. Worshiped by foreigners and shepherds and the poor of the village. He attracts the riffraff and the outcast. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He keeps company with all kinds of strange people, even embracing Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus is merciful and gracious. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps faithfulness to the thousandth generation even though His own creation turns on Him and kills Him. He forgives all iniquity and sin. He takes on the righteous judgment of the Father, perfectly fulfilling the justice of God. And He does all this so we can have a relationship with Him.

So what is our response? Do we bow our heads in worship? Do we fall on our faces before the Cross? Do we avert our eyes? Tremble in astonishment and awe at everything we've just seen and heard? Friends, Jesus came to give us life. Eternal life. And what is eternal life? The Apostle John tells us in John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Do you know Jesus? Do you have a deep, intimate relationship with God? Or do you just know about Him? Heard the rumors? The gossip? Do you keep Him at arm's length? Follow Him from a distance? God longs to draw you close. God longs to embrace you as His son or daughter. God longs for you to know His great love. Open your arms. Open your hearts. Receive Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 25:10-36:38, Matthew 27:32-66, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 9:7-8

February 13, 2019
GOD IS ON THE LOOSE!

Readings for today: Exodus 35:10-36:38, Matthew 27:32-66, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 9:7-8

A professor of mine in seminary once shared a story with us about a Bible study he led on the Gospel of Matthew. For many months, they walked through the gospel verse by verse. Most of the people in the room were adults who came eager to learn but there was one young teenager who basically fell asleep each class. His mom made him come each week so he would slouch in his chair in the back of the class totally disengaged. Or so it appeared. As they neared the end of the class, my professor was describing what happened at the death of Jesus. In particular, he wanted to know what people thought the significance was of the Temple curtain ripping in two. Most of the discussion centered on the traditional interpretation that the death of Jesus gives us free access to God. It was at this point that my professor noticed the young man sitting up in his chair with his hand raised. He called on him and asked him what he thought. The young man said, "I think you have it all wrong. I think the Temple curtain tearing in two means God now has free access to us. All the barriers have come down. God's now on the loose...and the world will never be the same." Amazing.

The death of Jesus changes everything. Not only is the Temple curtain torn in two but the earth itself shakes. Rocks shatter. The sun goes dark. Tombs open. The dead rise. The natural order of things is turned upside down. Things will never again be the same. And this makes perfect sense when one steps back to think about it. The death of Jesus represents the final payment for human sin. Jesus made atonement for the sins of the entire world according to 1 John 2:2. His suffering satisfies the wrath and judgment of God that had been building since the Fall. Now that the perfect Lamb of God was slain, a new situation is created. A new opportunity. A new creation. With the advent of the new creation, we should expect the old creation to react violently as it enters its death throes. Thus, the signs and wonders that accompany Jesus' last breath.

What is our response to the universe-altering, world-changing, history-transforming death of Jesus? Hopefully we, like the Roman centurion, respond in faith. "Truly this was the Son of God!" We look in awe and wonder at what God has done. The Creator dying for His creation. The Lord giving up His very life for His servants. God sacrificing everything to save those whom He so dearly loves.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 37-38, Matthew 28, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 9:9-10

February 14, 2019
GREAT COMMISSION

Readings for today: Exodus 37-38, Matthew 28, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 9:9-10

Anyone who knows me knows I love the mission of God. I love the global vision of the Kingdom. I love the picture Revelation paints of every tribe, tongue, and nation worshiping God around His throne. I love the commission God has given us to make disciples. To baptize. To teach. To obey. From the moment Jesus confronted me on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder, I have been passionate about sharing the good news of the gospel with everyone I meet.

Some have told me this is a special gift but they are wrong. This is a command given to the church. To everyone who calls on the name of Jesus. Mission is not something the church does. Mission is who the church is. It is our identity. It is our DNA. It is why we exist. The primary vehicle for the spread of the good news of the gospel in the world is the local church. Local bodies of believers who faithfully and joyfully obey the command to share Jesus with everyone in their community. This is the church's "great commission." It is our great privilege and honor to serve as heralds of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And to this great end we direct all our energy, time, and resources so that when we go before the Lord at the end of our lives, He will say, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

There is no high like sharing Jesus. Recently, a friend of mine was playing in a pool tournament with her unchurched friends. She is training to be a Stephen's Minister so was taking time after her match to study. Her friends started asking her about what she was doing. She told them about the call on her life to walk with hurting people and bring the comfort of Christ. One of them shared about a friend they had who was currently in the hospital. After listening to a bit of this person's story, my friend felt this overwhelming urge to go and visit and pray with her. She talked to me after worship. Asked for some tips on how to begin the conversation. She shared her fear about walking in on someone she didn't know. Would it be weird? Would it be awkward? What if she's asleep or in a procedure? We talked through all the scenarios, prayed together, and off she went. When she got to the room and knocked on the door, the woman looked her and said, "God sent you, didn't he?" WOW! Before she could introduce herself or say a word, God had already prepared this woman for this divine appointment! They talked and prayed and as she was leaving, the woman's boyfriend said, "Welcome to the family." How awesome is God?

Of course, my friend could barely contain herself! She was so filled with joy! Here she had taken a huge step of faith and God met her in a powerful way! This is what happens when we obey the Great Commission. Not that it always works out like this or is well-received. Sometimes we share and it's tough. People resist or react negatively. But even in those moments there is a peace that passes all understanding that guards our hearts and gives us the satisfaction of knowing we have obeyed our Lord and Savior. Friends, God's plan from creation has been to fill the earth with His divine glory! This is why He made us in His image and gave us dominion over all He has made! Be fruitful! Multiply! Share Christ! Make disciples of everyone you meet! Do not rest until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 39-40, Mark 1:1-28, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 9:11-12

February 15, 2019
IS GOD A DIVA?

Readings for today: Exodus 39-40, Mark 1:1-28, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 9:11-12

I grabbed a beer with a good friend yesterday. A master craftsman with an eye for detail. He's been reading the Bible in a Year with us and was struck by God's concern for the seemingly minute details of the Tabernacle. God planned this thing down to the cubit. He is passionate about every aspect of this dwelling. He wants only the best material. Only the best metal. Only the best yarn. He will accept only the best sacrifices. All this led my friend to a great question, "Is God a diva?"

I love it. We live in a world where people make all kinds of obnoxious demands. We often hear about celebrities attaching specific riders to their contracts requiring green M&M's, vanilla-scented candles, and bottled water chilled to a certain degree in their dressing rooms. We gag at the amount of pork our politicians fight over before they vote up or down on a bill. We're stunned by the amount of pomp and circumstance that goes into a royal wedding. And most of us know that deep down, given the right set of circumstances, we'd probably do the same. We're not immune from the feelings of entitlement that go along with wealth, power, and privilege.

So what's up with God? Is He insecure? Does He feel the need to prove Himself to us? Does He have a taste for the finer things of life? And what's up with the way He treats His people. Almost like they are slaves. Almost like they are possessions. Almost like they have no rights of their own. Is God a diva?

The very fact that we all ask this question betrays our deep biological connection to the first Adam. His original sin is hardwired into our DNA. We believe we are like God. We believe we are God's equal. God's peer. We believe we can question God. Doubt God. Push back on God. We believe we have a right to demand God submit to our human notions of fairness and justice. We believe God's answerable to us on some level. So when we read about all the gold and all the bronze and all the expensive dyes and ointments and incense that must be prepared before we can appropriately worship God, we get skeptical. Is all this really necessary? Can't we cut a corner here or there? Get by on less? Can't we keep some of this for ourselves? Wouldn't it make life easier? Isn't that what God really wants?

We are fools. We have no idea who we are dealing with. We have no conception of the immense gap that exists between humanity and God. God is NOT like us. God is wholly other. He is beyond any horizon we can possibly conceive. He is greater than anything we can possibly imagine. As high as the heavens are above the earth so are His thoughts higher than our thoughts. His ways higher than our ways. Most of all, God is holy. He is sinless. He is perfection. He created everything that was, is, and will be. He owns it all. He reigns sovereign over all. All of it made according to His will and for His good pleasure. Who are we to question God? Who are we to demand anything from God? Who are we to compare God to some human standard? If God chooses to pile up all the wealth of the entire earth in one place and set His throne upon it, who are we to protest? It is all His to begin with! If God chooses to use His people as He sees fit to accomplish His purposes in this world, who are we to argue? We would not exist without God!

The truly amazing thing about this whole section in Exodus is the mind-blowing miracle of God preparing to make His dwelling place among His people. It should bring us to our knees in awe and wonder. Our jaws should drop. Our minds should be blown. Our hearts filled with the conviction that overcame the prophet Isaiah when he had his vision of the Temple. God Himself has come to live with us. God Himself has come to walk by our side. God Himself has come to speak with us face to face. He has made a way where there would otherwise be no way. How great is our God!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 1-3, Mark 1:29-45, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 9:13-18

February 16, 2019
HOW TO READ LEVITICUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 1-3, Mark 1:29-45, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 9:13-18

Today we come to everyone's favorite book of the Bible...Leviticus. This is usually where well-intentioned Bible reading plans go to die. The laws seem archaic at best. They deal with issues we have little to no familiarity with as 21st century postmodern Christians living in the wealthiest nation the world has ever seen. The cultural distance is extreme and difficult to overcome. The minutiae wears down even the most faithful reader. We see little to no relevance for our lives.

And yet, Leviticus is God's Word as much as the Pauline Epistles. The laws contained in this book are as divinely inspired as the red sections of the gospels. Reading them devotionally helps shape our hearts as much as the language of the Psalms. So how can we read in such a way that we profit from spending devotional time in this book?

Two keys principles...

First, keep in mind there are three different kinds of laws listed here. There are the ceremonial laws that governed worship. Sacrifices. Personal hygiene. Disease. Particularly focused on ritual purity, these laws were designed to create the conditions where holiness could flourish so the people could come before their Holy God without fear. Second, there are the civil laws that governed the nation of Israel. Tithing. Inheritance. Sentencing guidelines. These laws were necessary to maintain order in society, create revenue for the national government, and promote social welfare. Third, there is the moral law governing behavior. Exemplified by the Ten Commandments, these laws were designed to teach us righteousness and many of the laws governing violence, sexuality, lying, honoring parents, and Sabbath regulations were created to embed this moral law in everyday life.

The second principle to remember is that Levitical law served three overarching purposes. First, as I just mentioned above, it was given to us by God to teach us righteousness. Righteousness is not a relative category. It is not something we create for ourselves. God sets a standard for righteousness that we, as His creation, are bound to follow. The Law is this standard. Second, the Law was given to restrain evil. Because we live in a society based on the principles of proportional justice, we fail to see how radical "an eye for an eye" truly was in ancient near east culture. Setting limits or restraints on vengeance was a massive leap forward for human society and while not necessarily unique to Israel, it did set them apart. The punishment must fit the crime and be serious enough to act as a deterrent to potential future crimes. Third, and most importantly, the Law was given to teach us our need for a Savior. We cannot keep the Law. We cannot achieve righteousness on our own. Our sinful nature rebels against God's commands and, if we're totally honest, we find ourselves violating them on a daily basis. The Law acts as a mirror of sorts to show us the true condition of our souls. Not to make us despair but to bring us to a point where we'll cry out to God! The Law ultimately humbles us. Brings us to our knees. Breaks our stubborn pride. It paves the way for Jesus.

As you read through Leviticus over the next several days, keep these things in mind lest you get lost the weeds of this important book. Put yourself in the place of an ancient Israelite living in abject poverty in a subsistence agrarian economy where the most important daily task is to secure enough food for you and your family. Imagine yourself living in a village with one to two hundred of your relatives. Raising kids together. Doing life together. Learning to survive together. Imagine going up to Jerusalem a few times a year to worship and the preparations you have to make for that particular journey. Then think about your own life. Do you live with the same intentionality? What would it look like if you did?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 4-5, Mark 2:13-3:6, Psalms 36, Proverbs 10:1-2

February 17, 2019
LIVING INTENTIONALLY

Readings for today: Leviticus 4-5, Mark 2:13-3:6, Psalms 36, Proverbs 10:1-2

If I were ever to preach a sermon series (watch out PEPC!) on Leviticus, it would be titled “Living Intentionally.” I mean, if nothing else, you have to admire the integrity of the sacrificial system. It makes a certain kind of sense. God is perfectly holy. God is perfectly just. God is perfectly righteous. And this perfect God desires to dwell with His people. There’s only one problem. Sin. Human beings are not holy. Not just. Not righteous therefore they cannot enter into the presence of God. Something therefore must be done to purify them before the Lord. They need a substitute. Someone or something to take their place. Pay the price God’s justice demands. Make satisfaction for their sin. So God institutes a system whereby sins are paid for in blood. The blood of specific animals for specific sins. The result is a purified people who can now live in relationship with a perfectly pure God.

Sadly, when we read this book, all we see are rules and regulations. Archaic laws governing strange behavior. We find them ridiculous. Dated. Certainly not binding or even relevant in a post-resurrection context where Christ has set us free from the demands of the Law. Of course, honesty demands that we acknowledge our innate hatred of any restrictions. We do not like to be told what to do or how to do it. We are Americans. Born to be free. Born with incredible privilege and opportunity. The very idea that someone - even God Himself - could demand anything from us is laughable. “I couldn’t believe in a God who...” As if God needs our belief? As if God should have to work to recruit us for His team? As if God has to prove Himself to us? It’s absurd.

Furthermore, all one has to do is take a look at the state of the world around us and we can easily see what a mess we’ve made of things. We are not good people. We are not smart people. We are not intentional people. We are driven by desire. Our passions get the best of us. Our emotions often override any kind of rational thought. I love how Yuval Harari – himself an atheist Jew - put it in His bestselling book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, “Despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever. We have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles – but nobody knows where we’re going. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction. Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don’t know what they want?” Scary, isn’t it? And right on point.

So what do we do? How shall we live? Is there another way? The Psalmist paints the big picture that Leviticus works out in detail. “Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated...Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” (Psalms 36:1-2, 5-7) We have a choice. We can depend on ourselves or we can depend on God. We can trust ourselves or we can trust God. We can keep going down the paths we’ve created for ourselves or we can walk in the paths of the Lord. Does that mean we have to keep Levitical Law? Of course not. (See yesterday’s post) But it does mean we have to take God far more seriously and obey God far more faithfully than we currently do. In short, we have to live with godly intentionality.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 6:1-7:27, Mark 3:7-30, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 10:3-4

February 18, 2019
LORD, LIAR, LUNATIC

Readings for today: Leviticus 6:1-7:27, Mark 3:7-30, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 10:3-4

C.S. Lewis once made this observation regarding Jesus. Either He is who He says He is - God incarnate - or He is the most evil man in history or He's completely insane. You don't really have any other choices. Now many will say Jesus is a good teacher but Lewis points out that this "good teacher" made all kinds of claims to be divine. Asked people to place their trust and hopes in Him. Demanded they leave their homes and livelihoods to follow Him. Required them to die to prove their faith in Him. Cast in this light, Jesus sounds more like a "cult leader" along the lines of Jim Jones or David Koresh. If Jesus is not God then He must be evil or insane or both. And certainly his contemporaries thought so. His own family thought He was crazy and sought "to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'" (Mark 3:21) The religious leaders were convinced He was evil. Possessed by the devil himself. "The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul,' and 'by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.'" (Mark 3:22)

So what do you believe? As Jesus will ask His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" What do you do with Jesus' teachings? No one I know believes they are the ramblings of an insane man. No credible scholar or philosopher has anything but the highest praise for the ethics of Jesus. What do you do with Jesus' miracles? No one I know believes his acts of compassion on the poor, the leper, the outcast, and sinner mask a much deeper evil. In fact, Jesus' example is often rightfully cited in support of social justice. What do you do with Jesus' death and resurrection? Why is it we're still talking about this guy after two thousand years? Certainly many other would-be messiahs were also crucified or executed in those days. Why does the name of Jesus still carry such freight while the names of these other revolutionaries have been forgotten? What keeps Jesus from being consigned to the dustbin of history?

Lewis rightfully points out that everything rides on what you believe about Jesus. If Jesus is who He says He is then this requires a radical re-orientation of our lives. We must seek to live as Jesus lived. Walk as Jesus walked. Love as Jesus loved. We must place our trust in Him. Accept Him as Lord and Savior. Allow His life to become the center of our lives. Define success the way He defined it. Use our time, talent, and treasure to serve His purposes. In short, it's as if the center of our solar system changes. Instead of life revolving around me, it must revolve around Him. Instead of focusing on how the moon (life) rotates around the earth (Self), we have to focus on how the earth (Self) rotates around the sun (Jesus). How is your life - family, work, friendships, school, vacation, leisure - revolving around Jesus?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 7:28-9:6, Mark 3:31-4:25, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 10:5

February 19, 2019
MYSTERY

Readings for today: Leviticus 7:28-9:6, Mark 3:31-4:25, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 10:5

Many years ago, a team of Jehovah's Witnesses came knocking on my door. I love theological conversation so I invited them in. We spoke for a great while about the differences between my faith and their faith. They do not believe in the Trinity. They reject the divinity of Jesus Christ. They believe He is "a god" but not "God." They do not understand why the One God would reveal Himself in Three Persons or how Jesus can be both fully God and fully human at the same time. It doesn't make sense. It's a paradox. And they clearly didn't like it. After talking in circles for a while about these deep mysteries of our faith, one of them finally got a little frustrated and said to me, "How can you be so content with mystery?" What a great question!

In Mark 4:11-12, Jesus tells His disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.'" He is quoting the prophet Isaiah and recalling a time in Israelite history when they hardened their hearts to God's Word. In response, God hardened them even further by sending a prophet who would seemingly speak God's truth in riddles. Now I know that seems unfair. Like God is somehow withholding the means of salvation from His people. But this is simply not the case. The people of God had already rejected the clear teaching of God that came down from Mt. Sinai. Again, their hearts were hardened in unbelief and disobedience. God, in His righteous judgment, simply steps back and says, "Thy will be done." And eventually the northern Kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the nation of Assyria. In the same way, Jesus looks out on the crowds who follow Him. They love His miracles. Love His teaching. Love the way He goes after the Pharisees. But they are spiritually blind. They do not believe. They had hardened their hearts and rejected God's Word. So Jesus teaches them in parables. He, being God, simply steps back and says, "Thy will be done." And the result is judgment.

Why does God do all this? Why is He so mysterious at times? Why does Jesus play things so close to the vest? He is acting according to His plan which He initiated from before the foundations of the world. Jesus is headed to the cross. He is going to let the judgment Israel deserved fall on Himself. He will bear God's wrath. He will take the punishment. He will sacrifice Himself in our place. This is the great messianic secret. God sending His Only Son to die so the world might be saved. No one expected this. No one believed it even when Jesus made it very clear. They couldn't fathom how the death of their Messiah would accomplish God's will. They hardened their hearts to this truth and Jesus hardens them even further by teaching in parables. He must be thoroughly despised and rejected by humanity if He is to fulfill His prophetic call.

People still harden their hearts today. They refuse to accept the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection. Christ was crucified publicly. His death is a matter of historical record. Christ was raised publicly. He appeared to hundreds of witnesses in bodily form. He ate with them. Drank with them. He touched them. He spoke with them. No other adequate explanation has been given for the empty tomb and yet we still refuse to believe. We cannot accept the mystery of Christ's atoning death and resurrection. It is beyond our understanding. And that's why the writer of Hebrews will say, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Repent and believe. Embrace the mystery of who God is and how He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 9:7-10:20, Mark 4:26-5:20, Psalm 37:30-40, Proverbs 10:6-7

February 20, 2019
DEMON POSSESSION

Readings for today: Leviticus 9:7-10:20, Mark 4:26-5:20, Psalm 37:30-40, Proverbs 10:6-7

I met a man once who claimed to be possessed by demons. I was serving as a prison chaplain at New Jersey State Prison at the time. The man shared his story with me as I walked the tiers one day. He was a satanist. He had been baptized in blood. He had participated in several ritual killings over the years and had been sentenced to life without parole. He heard voices. Especially at night. Telling him to harm himself. The walls felt like they were closing in on him and he wanted out. He was scared. And he wanted to know if I could help.

I've always believed demon possession was a real thing. But it existed for me more as an abstract concept than a concrete reality. Meeting this man made it real. As I listened to him describe in detail his life as a satanist, it became obvious he had suffered tremendous emotional and spiritual trauma. He would need a lot of help from a variety of different sources to recover. It would be a very long road. He and I read the story from Mark 5 together. He could identify with the man living among the tombs. A man who cried out and cut himself and fought the voices inside his head. A man who was cut off from community. Cut off from any relationships. A man who was all alone. Anxious. Afraid. We talked about what it would be like for him to meet Jesus. To sit at His feet. To listen to His voice. To believe in His name. To be set free. We had several meetings unpacking this story together. Slowly but surely he began to believe. Began to see himself differently. Began to experience the freedom Jesus offers. He also began working with a psychologist and processing his emotional trauma. It wasn't easy. There were a lot of setbacks. I remember the one of the biggest barriers for him was baptism. After he gave his life to Christ, he knew he needed to be baptized but struggled with the memories it evoked. He had almost drowned in his satanic baptism as they purposefully used the experience to traumatize him. Eventually, he was able to take that step and the freedom he experienced was profound and life-changing.

One of the greatest tricks the devil has ever pulled is to convince the world he doesn't exist. Especially the post-Enlightenment, materialistic western world in which we live in the United States. Life consists of several dimensions. Physical. Emotional. Intellectual. Spiritual. Jesus calls us to integrate each of these dimensions wholistically under His Lordship. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The enemy seeks to dis-integrate our lives. Set these dimensions in opposition to one another. Pit our feelings against our bodies. Our bodies against our minds. Our minds against our spirits. The result is chaos. Personally. Relationally. Communally. Thankfully, Jesus isn't afraid to enter the chaos of our lives. He alone can calm the storm. He alone can settle our souls. He alone can set us free.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 11-12, Mark 5:21-43, Psalms 38, Proverbs 10:8-9

February 21, 2019
THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Leviticus 11-12, Mark 5:21-43, Psalms 38, Proverbs 10:8-9

This is where Leviticus starts to get really challenging. Holy. Unholy. Clean. Unclean. Common. Polluted. Lots of words that we don't think much about in our own context and culture. This begs for some explanation.

Scholar Gordon Wenham does a great job describing the distinctions in his commentary.

"Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean.... cleanness is a state intermediate between holiness and uncleanness. Cleanness is the normal condition of most things and persons. Sanctification can elevate the clean into the holy, while pollution degrades the clean into the unclean. The unclean and the holy are two states which must never come in contact with each other." (pp. 19-20)

Why does all this matter? Because God's stated goal for His people is for them to be holy as He is holy. "For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy." (Lev. 11:44-45) Yes, in Christ the ceremonial laws of Leviticus have been fulfilled. We no longer need to worry about clean and unclean animals. (See Peter's vision in Acts 10 as an example.) We no longer need to fear being made unclean by touching lepers or coming into contact with the dead. Through His shed blood, Christ has not only washed us clean (in the Levitical sense) but also sanctified us permanently! This is incredible to think about as we read about the rituals the Israelites had to perform!

At the same time, the call to personal holiness has not been set aside. God still calls His people to be set apart. By thought. Word. Deed. We are called to "be holy as He is holy" and to offer our lives as "living sacrifices" according to Romans 12. The moral law is still in effect. God still has expectations for His people. Sin is still serious and should not be treated casually. This is why Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about the heart in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul spends a great deal of time on the ethical obligations of Christians in most of his letters. As Christians, we no longer need to undergo elaborate rituals to maintain a state of cleanliness or sanctification before the Lord but we should undergo regular examination and confession of our sin in light of the Word of God.

A great practical exercise is what's known as the "Daily Examen." Pioneered by Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, it is an intentional way to prayerfully reflect on our day, asking God to reveal what drew us closer to Him and what drew us away from Him. We think back on the actions, thoughts, and feelings we experienced during the day and we consciously "examen" them in light of the Word of God. We confess where our actions/thoughts/feelings fell short and we rejoice where our actions/thoughts/feelings reflected Christ. This is just one example of learning how to bring every thought captive to Christ and live for Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 13, Mark 6:1-29, Psalms 39, Proverbs 10:10

February 22, 2019
CHURCH “SUCCESS???”

Readings for today: Leviticus 13, Mark 6:1-29, Psalms 39, Proverbs 10:10

“And Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” (Mark 6:7-13)

I cannot begin to count the number of conferences I get invited to each year promising the latest and greatest techniques to help my church reach our community. Leaders from the most successful churches - (Read: largest in weekly attendance) - keynote session after session letting you in on the secret to their success. Vision. Mission. Philosophy. Core values. Strategy. Frankly, it all sounds very corporate to me. I used to attend faithfully. Every year I would make my way to one conference or another searching for new ideas on how to jump start my church. Every year I would return home with books, CD’s, podcasts, and all sorts of other material to help me in my quest. Every year I would become disillusioned and disappointed as my new ideas failed one after the other. Eventually, I burned out on conferences and instead turned back to Scripture.

It is striking to see the difference between the Jesus way and the way of the American church in the 21st century. Jesus simply sends his disciples out two by two into towns and villages all over Galilee. They take nothing for their journey. No fundraising. No denominational support. No purchasing of property or building of buildings. They literally take what they have on their backs and go. When they arrive at their destination, they pay attention to how they are received. If they are not received well or the gospel is rejected, they move on. If they are received, they stay and minister. By faith, they preach. By faith, they pray. By faith, they cast out demons and heal the sick. And God provides miraculously for them along the way.

Many call the way of Jesus unrealistic. It doesn’t fit our cultural context. We have needs that must be met. Plans that must be made. Strategies that must be developed. Vision that must be cast. I think God chuckles at our futile efforts. Dick Halverson, long-time chaplain for the US Senate, once remarked, “In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved to Europe where it became a culture, and, finally, it moved to America where it became an enterprise.” Sadly, his words still ring true. Why is the church struggling in America? Why are we losing the cultural battle? Why are so many people leaving the church? Because we refuse to listen to Jesus. We refuse to align our ways to His ways. Our hearts with His heart.

A friend of mine asked me the other day, “Why is the church failing?” “It’s not”, I replied. Look around the world. The church is exploding in Africa and Latin America and Asia. It’s growing in the Global South and the Far East. It’s thriving under persecution. It’s multiplying under political and social oppression. It’s tearing down the gates of hell in all sorts of places. “Why not here then?” He asked. Great question. The answer is simple. We will not follow the Jesus Way. We continue to abandon the Jesus Truth. So we cannot expect to receive the Jesus Life. The church in America must repent of her sinful obsession with corporate success and instead humble herself at the feet of Her Lord, letting Him guide and direct our steps.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 14, Mark 6:30-56, Psalms 40:1-10, Proverbs 10:11-12

February 23, 2019
LEVITICUS AND JESUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 14, Mark 6:30-56, Psalms 40:1-10, Proverbs 10:11-12

Someone posed a great question from our readings today. Why do Leviticus and Jesus seem so opposed to one another? Especially in their treatment of lepers? In Leviticus, they are considered outcasts. Separated from their community. They are to live in isolation or with others who share their disease. They are not welcome in the Temple. Not welcome in the market. Not welcome in people's homes. If they do experience healing, the rituals are elaborate for restoration and, knowing how human beings tend to work, they probably still carried the stigma the rest of their lives. Contrast all this with Jesus who welcomed lepers. Healed them. Purified them. Touched them. Embraced them. Jesus restored them to community with a word. It all seems so contradictory unless you take a step back and remember the bigger picture.

This world is not our home. This world is broken and ruined by the Fall. This world is corrupt and full of sin. It manifests itself in all kinds of ways, disease and death among them. All of us suffer in this world. All of us are subject to its limitations. God's world (heaven) is not like this world. God's world is whole and perfect. God's world is pure and holy. God's world is righteous and just. Sin and evil do not exist there so there is no suffering, no crying, no pain. Adam's fateful decision to rebel against God ruptured the connection between our world and God's world. Severed it completely. Without God, we would have been set adrift for all eternity. No hope of salvation. God, however, loves our world as much as He loves His own. So He bridges the gulf. He keeps the lines of communication open. He gives Moses a plan for a Tabernacle. A place where He will meet with His people. However, God is holy and cannot tolerate unholiness, impurity, or sin in His presence. So the Israelites are given laws in order to keep them pure before God. These laws are given to govern them in a world that is hostile to holiness. Hostile to purity. Hostile to God. A world in rebellion. These laws are not ends in themselves. Living by them is not the goal. They point beyond themselves to the greater reality which is God Himself. This is why David says, "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required...I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." (Psalms 40:6, 8) David understands the sacrifices, while good, serve a bigger purpose. They should draw us close to God. They should give us a heart for God. We can never confuse the ends and the means. The same is true for the laws concerning lepers. Yes, leprosy made one impure. Yes, impurity separated you from worship and from community. At the same time, God's people should extend compassion and care for the lepers in their midst. Provide for them as they suffered in their disease. Rejoice when they were healed and restored. This would serve as a sign that God's world was breaking into our world through the medium of His chosen people!

Sadly, Israel failed in this mission. Their own sin got in the way. They could follow all the laws perfectly but their hearts were still corrupt. So God sends Jesus. The living embodiment of God's world now coming to live in our world. Jesus brings with Him all God's holiness. All God's purity. All God's wisdom and power and authority because He is God incarnate! God has nothing to fear from our world. There is nothing in this world that can possibly hurt Him or harm Him or make Him impure in any way. So Jesus touches lepers and makes them clean. Jesus heals disease. Drives out demons. Raises the dead. All of these things are signs that God's world has now entered our world. The infinite now occupies the finite. The holy confronts the unholy. The pure overcomes the impure. Sin and evil are put to flight whenever Jesus shows up on the scene. Our world reacts violently to this invasion. Responds by seeking to sever the connection between our world and God's world once again. Kill Jesus and we'll finally be free! Free of God's reign! Free of God's rule! Free to do as we please! So we hang Jesus on a cross. We commit the greatest sin in human history. Deicide...we murder God. But God's world is not like our world. God's life is not subject to death. So He rises from the grave and now the connection between our world and God's world is made permanent. Sealed by the blood of God's own Son. No longer will this world be adrift. No longer will sin hold sway. No longer will death and disease have the final word. No longer will impurity separate us from God. Because of what Christ accomplished, all things are made new. All sin is atoned for. Death has been defeated. And we are free to live in this world as citizens of God's world, embracing the "lepers" wherever they may be found.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 15:1-16:28, Mark 7:1-23, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 10:13-14

February 24, 2019
INSIDE OUT

Readings for today: Leviticus 15:1-16:28, Mark 7:1-23, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 10:13-14

“And Jesus said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:18-23)

How does transformation happen? From the outside in? Or the inside out? Human beings seem naturally inclined to believe the former. If we just enact the right laws. If we just enforce the right rules. If we just require the right behavior then we can achieve a more equal society. If we can just reform the system. Depose corrupt officials. Replace those in power then we will have life, liberty, and justice for all. Of course it never does work out that way. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. As soon as anyone achieves a certain level of power, privilege, and wealth; they soon find themselves doing all they can to protect it. Preserve it. Use it for their own benefit. Human beings simply cannot transform themselves. No matter how hard we try, we simply cannot work our way to righteousness.

Jesus shows us a different way. According to Him, the problem lies within. His diagnosis is a broken heart. Our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and actions are merely symptoms of a deeper, more pervasive disease. Our hearts are corrupt. They are full of all kinds of evil thoughts. Lust. Covetousness. Jealousy. Anger. These things are always lurking beneath the surface waiting for the right moment to emerge. The only hope we have is a heart transplant. We need Jesus to remove our hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh. Hearts sensitive to the things of God. Hearts purified by the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. Once our hearts have been healed then we can go to work on the rest. Without this heart transplant, we will always be fighting a losing battle against ourselves.

Of course, we cannot force transformation. We cannot legislate saving faith. People are free to make their own decisions as to what they believe. This is why we must get on our knees and pray. Pray for God to move. Pray for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on all flesh. Pray for revival across our nation and our world. Only God can bring about the transformation we all need and want. Only God can bring justice and righteousness to the earth. Only God can renew and restore all creation. May each of us pray fervently for God to do His work in our hearts and in the hearts of those we love that might become the people He created us to be.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 16:29-18:30, Mark 7:24-8:10, Psalms 41, Proverbs 10:15-16

February 25, 2019
SEXUAL RESTRAINT

Readings for today: Leviticus 16:29-18:30, Mark 7:24-8:10, Psalms 41, Proverbs 10:15-16

One of the hallmarks of the Judeo-Christian faith is its sexual ethic. From the opening pages of Genesis, God makes clear His design for sexuality. It is to be enjoyed within the boundaries of covenant marriage between one man and one woman. The physical act of sex is one sign among many of the “oneness” God created us to reflect as His image-bearers. Though it is often claimed otherwise, Jesus Christ affirms God’s design in Matthew 19:4-6 as does the Apostle Paul throughout his letters. This ethic is consistently portrayed throughout Scripture as the norm. The pattern. The paradigm for godly human relationships. Are there examples where God’s design is not followed? Absolutely. Polygamy, adultery, incest, rape, etc. all make their appearance in the Scriptures, many of them being committed by God’s people. However, at no time does God affirm them as acceptable alternatives to His design.

The sexual drive of human beings is a powerful force. Almost impossible to resist. God knows this because He created it in the first place. Corrupted by the Fall, it leads to all kinds of self-destructive behaviors. Just look at the Canaanites as an example. Their culture was rife with sexual immorality. The fertility rites of their religion were essentially large scale sexual orgies in which the priests and priestesses had sex with multiple men and women. They also might re-enact Baal’s copulation with cows or offer their children as sacrifices. They communed with the dead by having sex with their closest living relative. All this in an effort to ensure the harvest for the coming year. Archaeological evidence suggests most Canaanites lived in fear of their priests. Marriages and families were torn apart and the unwanted children of these annual unions were often slaughtered on altars to Baal or Dagon. Sexually transmitted disease was likely epidemic; rape was perhaps as common as it is in the worst of today’s war-ravaged nations. It is against this horrific backdrop that God issues the laws concerning sexual behavior in Leviticus 18.

Sadly, humanity refuses to listen. Sexual restraint is considered antiquated at best, bigoted at worst. Even the suggestion that sexuality be reserved for covenant marriage between a man and a woman is considered hate speech in some circles. Human beings desire sexual freedom above everything else but what have we gained? Shattered relationships. Rampant sexual abuse. A rise in sexually transmitted disease. Thousands of unwanted pregnancies. Does any of this give us pause? Cause us to stop and reflect that maybe our way is not the best way? No. Instead, we seek ways to make sex “safer.” We ignore the emotional toll it takes in a person’s life. We kill our babies in the name of “choice” because we don’t want to face the very real consequences of our actions. Far from making progress, we have simply reverted to type. We are no different, and certainly no better, than the ancient Canaanites!

There is only one way to experience true sexual freedom and that is to live within the restraints God has set up. They are for our good. For our protection. They are designed to help us flourish as human beings and experience the depths of intimacy. There is nothing like giving one’s whole self – body, mind, and soul - to a member of the opposite sex within the sacred covenant of marriage. It is designed to be a reflection of the unity God desires to have with His people. Some will argue this isn’t fair because not everyone can get married. Not everyone experiences heterosexual desire. Not everyone is able to find their soulmate. I understand and I grieve. It is a tender subject for me personally as I walk alongside those I love. Our world is truly broken. Our sexual desires are disordered, misdirected, and all jumbled up. All of us look forward to the Day when God makes all things new and sets all things right. On that Day, marriage will cease to exist according to Jesus because we will enjoy perfect intimacy with Him and with one another. No one will be left out. But until that Day comes, we must submit our sexuality to God. We must embrace God’s design. Sexual faithfulness within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman or sexual faithfulness in celibacy as a single person.

I know that last statement sounds scary and again, unfair. It feels like God is robbing many of us of something very special. Unrequited sexual desire can lead to a sense of existential loneliness which is painful and all too real to so many in our world today. Depression, despair, and suicide haunt our loved ones who are struggling. This is

where we must cling to the sufficiency of Christ. He is more than enough to meet all of our needs. He is faithful to comfort us in the midst of our grief. He gives us the strength to follow His commands. He recognizes we will suffer in this life and He promises He will make it up to us in the world to come. Furthermore, Christ does not leave us alone or adrift. He gives us the gift of His church. A family. A community of believers to fill the empty void in our hearts. Now I get the church is all kinds of messed up. The sexual abuse propagated by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike is terrifying and traumatic. But that's not every church. In fact, it's not even most churches. Most churches are like families where people from all walks of life can connect and find community.

Friends, if you are struggling to submit your sexuality – in whatever form – to Jesus, I want you to know you are not alone. I am here for you. PEPC is here for you. If you live out of state or out of the country, chances are there is a church nearby where you can go and find hope. You will be accepted for who you are. Given the space to wrestle with temptation in an authentic way. You will find a safe space to express your doubts, fears, and anxiety. Most of all, you will be challenged to fix your eyes on Christ and find your deepest satisfaction and fulfillment in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 19:1-20:21, Mark 8:11-38, Psalms 42, Proverbs 10:17

February 26, 2019
THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for today: Leviticus 19:1-20:21, Mark 8:11-38, Psalms 42, Proverbs 10:17

Raise your hand if you knew the Golden Rule came from Leviticus? Now repent because you broke the 8th Commandment! :-) Most associate the Golden Rule with Jesus and rightfully so. After all, Jesus repeats it as part of His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 7:12) However, very few people realize that God first enshrined this rule in law in Leviticus. Lost in all the conversation about sacrifices and priestly garments and what one should eat or wear is this beautiful picture of community life in Leviticus 19:9-18.

We see God's heart for the poor and less fortunate..."When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God."

We see God's concern for honesty and transparency..."You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's compassion, especially for the less abled in our midst..."You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's desire for justice and righteousness and truth..."You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord."

And finally, we see God's admonition against hate, anger, rage, contempt, and most of all, vengeance..."You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

This are massively applicable in our world today! Could you imagine a community of people who sought to put these into practice? On a daily basis? Who gave generously? Dealt honestly? Showed compassion? Fought for truth? Laid aside anger and rage and malice and hate in the name of love? Hopefully you can! It's called the Church! Now I know no church is perfect. After all, it's full of imperfect sinners like me who struggle to keep God's law faithfully. However, as we seek God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we can expect to see some of these same behaviors break loose in our lives! We can expect to bear this kind of fruit for the Kingdom! And as brothers and sisters called into community together, we can make a HUGE difference in the world today! That's the call! That's the challenge! That was God's plan for Israel and it's still God's plan for His people today!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 20:22-22:16, Mark 9:1-29, Psalms 43, Proverbs 10:18

February 27, 2019
THIN SPACES

Readings for today: Leviticus 20:22-22:16, Mark 9:1-29, Psalms 43, Proverbs 10:18

Years ago, I encountered the idea of a “thin space.” A place where the veil between this world and the next becomes permeable, even translucent. All of a sudden, we can see into God’s world from our world. The dimensions of heaven and earth merge and intersect. It is the space of miracles. The space where the divine meets the mundane face to face.

I believe the Bible records such a space when it describes what happens on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus has just given his disciples a promise. Some of them will not taste death until they get to see the Kingdom of God come in power. Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Once they arrive on the summit, Jesus is “transfigured” before them, meaning He appears to them in all His divine glory. His robes become radiant, taking on an intensity never before seen on earth. Elijah and Moses, the greatest of the Old Testament saints, appear beside Him. They begin to converse. A cloud overshadows them and a voice thunders from the atmosphere surrounding them, “This is my Beloved Son, listen to Him.” They fall on their faces in reverent fear.

Where is heaven? Is it up in the sky somewhere? Perhaps deep into outer space? The famous Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was asked if he found God when he went into space. No, he replied. I searched and searched but He was not there. Heaven is not a physical place residing somewhere out there in the farthest reaches of our universe. It lies in another dimension altogether. “Heaven” and “Earth” are simply different names to two different dimensions of Life. Death is the gateway between them. The dimension of heaven exists all around us all the time. In fact, the very word translated “heaven” in the Scriptures can also mean “atmosphere.” That’s how I prefer to think about it. We are immersed in it even though we cannot see it. God speaks to us from the air surrounding us. The saints who have gone before us are constantly moving in and among us. All of them waiting for the day when God finally brings these two dimensions together once and for all.

Perhaps the most common “thin space” I encounter is the one surrounding the death bed of those we love. Whenever a person crosses from this dimension of life into the next, they are never alone. They pass from the arms of those they love into the arms of Jesus. It’s a sacred moment. Many years ago, my mother was caring for her parents as they lay dying. My grandmother was suffering from end stage dementia. She had literally been catatonic for years. Never spoke a word. Never responded to anyone’s voice. She just lay curled up in the fetal position in her bed. As the end drew near, the people with her were startled to see her sit straight up, hold out her arms, and exclaim, “I see angels.” Then she passed. That’s a thin space.

What about you? Where have you encountered “thin spaces” in your life? For instance, did you know that when you received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you were given the gift of the Holy Spirit? That’s right! At salvation, the Third Person of the Trinity comes to take up residence in our hearts! This means Christians are literally walking, talking “thin spaces”, mediating Christ wherever we go! In whatever we do! Through whatever we say! Think of everyone you will encounter today. How can you let Christ who lives in you speak through you to their hearts? How can you be the “thin space” through which God speaks and draws others to Himself?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 22:17-23:44, Mark 9:30-10:12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 10:19

February 28, 2019
SABBATH

Readings for today: Leviticus 22:17-23:44, Mark 9:30-10:12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 10:19

The first feast of the Lord listed in Leviticus 23 is the Sabbath. One day a week set aside for rest. Hardwired into creation itself, the Sabbath may be the most important and most neglected spiritual discipline of our time. The world runs 24/7. The ubiquity of social media creates an expectation that we must be “on” all the time. Most of us feel like we can’t get away from our work even for an hour much less an entire day. As rates of anxiety and depression rise, accompanied by self-destructive coping mechanisms of self-harm, addiction, and suicide; one must ask the question, is it time to re-commit ourselves to a weekly Sabbath?

I keep a Sabbath. Every Monday I purposefully set aside all my work. I do not answer email. I do not answer phone calls. I do not respond to texts. I am adding a social media fast as well starting this week. I spend time in worship. I spend time talking to my accountability partner of almost twenty years. I spend time reading, resting, relaxing. I go to the gym. I spend time with my kids when they get home from school. We do not schedule any events on Monday evenings if at all possible. This weekly rhythm acts as a “speed bump” in my life, slowing me down on a regular basis.

Are there times when I violate my Sabbath? Yes. If I fail to be diligent and get all my work done in the previous six days. If I’m working on a big project or taking on a new role. If I’m under a significant deadline. However, I try to build in extra rest after those seasons come to an end so I dial life back to a sustainable pace.

My life is busy. I have four teenage children who deserve my time and attention and love. I serve as the senior pastor for a Kingdom-minded church in a community with many needs. I serve as an adjunct professor teaching graduate students about evangelism and mission two semesters every year. I serve as a board member for a growing mission organization that’s doing amazing work in the Horn of Africa. I’ve been given opportunities to serve at different levels of my denomination. It’s a rich and full and beautiful life. Without a Sabbath, I would quickly burn out.

I know your life is busy as well. Work. Family. School. Church. Kid’s activities. I am sure you feel like you barely get through each day. Let me encourage you to master your schedule. To wrest control of your life from the enemy who wants to drive you to exhaustion and burnout. Set aside one day out of every week for Sabbath rest. Turn off your phone. Fast from social media. Create a “no-tech” zone in your life for just 24 hours. Rest. Relax. Take a walk with those you love. Worship. Spend uninterrupted time with God. Let Him renew and restore you for the week ahead. There is no “one” way to keep a Sabbath. The only guidance Scripture gives is worship and rest. Gather with God’s people to give Him the praise He is due and then do whatever you need to do to relax and let your mind and body recover. Keep the Sabbath day, my friends. Your very life depends on it.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 24:1-25:46, Mark 10:13-31, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 10:20-21